

Archived Information

Interim Evaluation of the Mid-continent Regional Educational Laboratory

I. Brief Overview of Laboratory Review

The Mid-continent Regional Educational Laboratory (McREL) interim evaluation took place at McREL's Aurora, Colorado office May 3–7, 1999. I reviewed all the materials sent to each panelist in addition to materials given to panelists on site. During the site visit, the Panel heard and watched several presentations by McREL staff and clients.

As I will elaborate on later in this report, it was at times difficult to separate Laboratory activities conducted under the OERI contract from other Laboratory activities. There are three major entities that are interrelated at this laboratory: McREL, which includes the OERI-funded effort as well as other funds from State Educational Agencies (SEAs), and which, in a document titled "McREL Sources of Revenue," is referred to as "Laboratory"; MCL, which is a for-profit entity; and the McREL Institute, which handles contracts from Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) and other external contractors. For fiscal years 96–98, the OERI-funded portion of McREL accounted for 43% of the combined budget of the three entities, while the entire McREL including the OERI part accounted for 71% of the budget.

For this report, I use the acronym "McREL" or the word "Laboratory" generally to refer to the OERI-funded regional educational laboratory unless otherwise noted. In the documents available to the Panel, no single word or brief term was used to refer to the OERI-funded portion of McREL.

II. Implementation and Management

A. To what extent is the REL doing what they were approved to do during their first three contract years?

1. Strengths

One could try to address this question in terms of the goals in the McREL proposal to OERI, but it seemed more useful to look at McREL's array of proposed activities designed to achieve those goals or objectives. Under the first activity, McREL helped establish various groups to focus on educational concerns. The partnerships described in Signature Work #2 were strong examples of collaboration and constituent involvement. The four research programs promised in the second activity are underway (and also feature partnerships). The third activity of implementing a comprehensive set of field services has resulted in direct assistance to LEAs and SEAs. Under the fourth activity, State liaisons and State Facilitation Groups are in place and functioning well. As an active member of the Laboratory Network Program, McREL had addressed the fifth activity by taking on the specialty area of curriculum, learning, and instruction, often run through a standards lens. The sixth activity of providing assistance to OERI and to the National Educational Policies and Priorities Board in supporting educational reform (including enhancing the capabilities of the Laboratories and OERI) has been met by McREL through things like various research syntheses and sponsoring of conferences. In the final task, McREL proposed to expand and build upon its existing expertise in curriculum, learning, and instruction, and school change. A major way that the Laboratory has addressed this is through their extensive work in the area of standards.

There were no major concerns expressed in the ratings of the Laboratory's performance turned in by its program officer (the one possibly problematic area is discussed in the "needed

improvement” section of II. A.).

The Laboratory leadership regularly conducts meetings to ensure timely progress as well as communication across programs.

2. Areas of needed improvement

Given the Laboratory’s emphasis on (a) creating innovative models, tools, and strategies to facilitate systemic reform and subsequent scale up efforts and (b) developing local, state, and regional capacity to plan, implement, and evaluate reform initiatives, McREL needs to conduct relevant high-quality evaluation, especially given its assertion in the proposal (p. iii) that evaluation “pervades every major task and serves to assess the progress and impact of the Laboratory and to guide its direction.”

According to the Statement of Work that laboratory proposals were to address, “Each Laboratory must also ensure that 25 percent of its resources are used to serve rural areas.” I did not see any written assertion in the documents that this requirement was met, but McREL informed the Panel orally that the actual percentage is something like 30%–35%.

The McREL Board passed a resolution that directs its nominating committee to actively seek out for membership, individuals who will provide additional representation from culturally diverse populations as well as from two job-related constituencies. That resolution is cited in McREL’s responses to technical questions. In our interview with a sample of Board members, however, we were informed that they did not know of any efforts to obtain ethnic or gender representativeness. The Board member listing that we were given showed at most 9 out of 27 or 33% as being women. In the Laboratory itself almost three fourths of the employees are women. This contradistinction suggests an apparent inconsistency worth discussing.

For the formal ratings from OERI program officers, the only area that several times

received a rating of 3 instead of the more common 4 (maximum) for the other areas was related to timely submission of deliverables. That problem is in part explained by the shortage of staff (there are currently six unfilled positions) at McREL. A remarkable 20+% was reported as the turnover rate for 1998, suggesting that staff turnover may be worth studying to see if it can be reduced.

3. Recommendations for improvement

If the thinking is such that it may take substantial time before effects for a particular intervention can be expected, then such concerns should be expressed up front to potential clients. Likewise if it makes more sense to measure intermediate effects such as increased teacher use of research-based strategies, then that should be made explicit and a focus of data collection.

B. To what extent is the REL using a self-monitoring process to plan and adapt activities in response to feedback and customer needs?

1. Strengths

Much effort has been made to collect feedback data from clients (e.g., the Field Service Partners Survey in 1999), with a purported focus on “assuring the quality of deliverables and products as they move through the development process by conducting a series of internal and external reviews.” McREL has developed formal procedures for responding to client inquiries and feedback, with a service standard for providing responses in a week or less. In most cases answers are provided within one or two days.

In the FY97 evaluation, follow-up activities addressing problem areas uncovered in FY96 were delineated. Although these annual evaluations are not required deliverables under the OERI contract, McREL voluntarily submits them to OERI. Another good example of the Laboratory using QA feedback to modify a product is shown in the response to reviewers’ comments on *Research Into Practice: Implementing Standards in the Classroom*.

2. Areas of needed improvement

With a modest amount of additional effort, the methodology used to get feedback from users could be improved. McREL's several self-monitoring efforts could be improved by (a) increasing the response rate (where the response rates were low, there was no indication of any additional effort to increase the rate); (b) ensuring samples are representative of the population; and (c) including the collection of data directly addressing product or program improvement.

The 1998FY evaluation report has not been completed.

3. Recommendations for improvement

Use more rigorous evaluation designs, striving for unbiased, representative samples, and focus also on the post-development phase of products and programs.

Follow up with non-responders to try to increase return rates. This could be as simple as sending out another questionnaire to non-responders. Consider using incentives for responders.

III. Quality

To what extent is the REL developing high-quality products and services?

1. Strengths

McREL makes good use of comprehensive literature reviews, expert panels, and field-based experiences to guide the development of their products and programs. For example, in developing *Learner-centered psychological principles: Guidelines for school redesign and reform*, the Laboratory made extensive use of external reviewers. A formal Quality Assurance procedure is in place for the development of all products and services.

McREL is regarded as a good source of the latest research on what works. It also has assisted its clients in getting into thinking about education from a research base.

The feedback from users has been mostly positive. Several users informed the Panel that if it had not been for McREL, a number of schools would not have gotten accreditation. In addition there have been numerous external awards.

2. Areas of needed improvement

The Quality Assurance programs allows Class III products and deliverables to be reviewed by senior-level Laboratory staff and external reviewers. It was not clear in the quality-assurance documents the Panel received how much external review is actually used, but the Panel was informed in an on-site discussion that all Class III (includes clearly sensitive/controversial information; audience size varies; large sphere of influence) products get reviewed by at least one external reviewer.

It is somewhat ironic that the QA Reviewer's Feedback Form for products and deliverables itself had errors in it. Instead of stating ". . . sexual preference or nationality" the form states ". . . sexual preference of nationality." Under "Recommendation" near the bottom, instead of "This product . . ." it states "This plan . . ." which is the wording appropriate for the QA Specification Plan Feedback Form. Another suggestion for improving quality of McREL reports is to simply use a spell checker. Typographical errors such as misspellings were found in documents such as *Evaluation Plan of the Mid-Continent Regional Educational Laboratory, Revised March 25, 1997* (pg. 14, ". . . Studeis [sic] . . ."; and pg. 15, "The nature of this work and its likely schedule is [sic] not yet clear.")

An institutional review board (IRB) at the Laboratory was not mentioned in the material we received; however, the Panel was informed orally that the Laboratory is starting to set up a review process. It is my understanding that any student surveys or use of student school records conducted using USDE monies require written parental consent (Family Educational Rights and

Privacy Act [FERPA] and Protection of Pupil Rights Amendment [PRPA]). For adults, informed consent is often not required for questionnaire-based research, but sometimes it is required, and McREL also conducts research involving observations, so privacy concerns may arise. Some recent legal developments suggest that more types of studies than before may require written informed consent procedures.

3. Recommendations for improvement

Unless there is a compelling reason against it, I recommend that McREL put dates on all important publications. The lack of dates sometimes made it difficult for the Panel to fully understand how particular documents fit into the larger picture. Users other than the Panel also have a right to know how recently documents were created; furthermore, dating seems to be a standard followed by virtually all commercial and academic publishers. Examples of undated (at least in the rendition the Panel received) documents include *What's Noteworthy on...Education Issues in the Heartland*; *A Comprehensive Guide to Designing Standards-Based Districts, Schools, and Classroom*; and *Content Knowledge: A Compendium of Standards and Benchmarks for K–12 Education (2nd edition)*.

IV. Utility

A. To what extent are the products and services provided by the Laboratory useful to and used by customers?

1. Strengths

By trying to be current and poised to help schools on short notice, the Laboratory has sometimes been able to serve as a resource much needed by schools under pressure to respond to mandates and initiatives (e.g., moving to standards and standards-based assessment, improving reading, and comprehensive school reform).

McREL has used externally obtained client input (e.g., The Gallup Organization conducted the 1998 District Educational Assessment Study) in planning the Laboratory's future efforts. Products are eventually available through a variety of modes such as print, Web sites, videos, and in-person workshops.

That McREL products and services are in demand is shown by the Laboratory's receiving more than \$4 million in FY98 for McREL publications and non-federal contracts. In FY96, McREL staff were involved in more than 500 training/technical assistance activities that served more than 14,000 persons. Those numbers increased in FY97.

2. Areas of needed improvement

In order for good products to be used (and therefore to be useful), they have to first get into the hands of potential users.

3. Recommendations for improvement

Perhaps a research study could help the Laboratory determine how to maximize dissemination (and therefore, use) of its products.

B. To what extent is the REL focused on customer needs?

1. Strengths

McREL regularly collects feedback from clients; for example, after workshops. Most of the feedback has been highly positive. Several individuals reported that the Laboratory really met their needs.

By sponsoring many workshops and conferences throughout the country, McREL has provided the level of support needed in order for major school changes to take place. By conducting regular needs assessments, McREL remains informed of the type of support schools need and want.

The Laboratory develops and pilot tests its products in real school settings, thus enhancing the likelihood that the products will be useful to teachers and other educators.

2. Areas of needed improvement

Needs assessments seem to consist almost exclusively of responses to questionnaires from clients or potential clients.

3. Recommendations for improvement

Consider conducting more comprehensive needs assessments that are based on more than user feedback.

V. Outcomes and Impact

A. To what extent is the REL's work contributing to improved student success, particularly in intensive implementation sites?

1. Strengths

We found two case studies that show student success, largely credited to Laboratory assistance. In general, however, there seemed to be sparse amounts of data on student success.

Many of the Laboratory's works are available by downloading from the Laboratory's web site. Much of the Laboratory's work addresses current national as well as regional needs (e.g., standards and school improvement)

2. Areas of needed improvement

When it is appropriate, the Laboratory needs to conduct rigorous studies to evaluate the impact its products or services have on students and teachers.

3. Recommendations for improvement

The Laboratory also should make explicit what it feels is the appropriate time to try to measure impact on students.

B. To what extent does the Laboratory assist states and localities to implement comprehensive school improvement strategies?

1. Strengths

The volume of work conducted by McREL is impressive. In FY96, McREL staff were involved in more than 500 training/technical assistance activities that served more than 14,000 persons. Those numbers increased in FY97.

There were several reports of clients citing the Laboratory as being instrumental in getting them to implement their comprehensive school improvement efforts.

Scaling up efforts are a regular part of the Laboratory's approach. The Laboratory has most often shown a willingness to make their products accessible to a wide audience. It has also sponsored a number of major conferences geared toward enhancing school improvement.

Once the Laboratory gets involved with schools, it maintains support through implementation and follow-up. It has provided focus to schools efforts to employ best practices; for example, it has made available literature reviews as well as booklets designed to enhance a best-practice approach. The Laboratory's web site has high usage as evidenced by more than a million hits monthly.

2. Areas of needed improvement

Because McREL is viewed as a national leader in school improvement, it is obligated to ensure that the approaches it advocates and the products it produces are research based and school tested. Furthermore, any related research conducted by the Laboratory must be rigorous enough to meet the profession's standards.

3. Recommendations for improvement

Consider extending the Quality Assurance process to apply to approaches and products beyond the development stage.

C. To what extent has the REL made progress in establishing a regional and national reputation in its specialty area?

1. Strengths

McREL is currently providing services or having its products and programs used in places widely spread out geographically throughout the U.S. Among its widely used products are *Content Knowledge: A Compendium of Standards and Benchmarks for K-12 Education*. The Laboratory has cooperative working relationships on specific projects with nationally prominent

institutions or agencies such as the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, Lockheed Martin Astronautics, National Education Association, and the New York Times. The Laboratory as well as partners such as ASCD have published numerous Laboratory-developed materials. McREL is well represented in professional journals and presentations at professional conferences.

2. Areas of needed improvement

Consistent with the earned national reputation, relevant products and services should undergo rigorous formative and summative evaluation.

3. Recommendations for improvement

Extend the focus of the QA process beyond the development stage.

VI. Overall Evaluation of Total Laboratory Programs, Products, and Services

The Mid-continent Regional Educational Laboratory has played key roles in supporting many schools, districts, and states in their school-improvement efforts, especially in the area of standards. It has fostered a myriad of successful partnerships and has produced a multitude of products, many of which have been widely disseminated.

The Laboratory has a good reputation, nationally, regionally, and locally. Along with that high reputation goes the obligation to ensure that products and services are rigorously evaluated and subsequently turn out to be effective.

VII. Broad Summary of Strengths, Areas for Improvement, and Strategies for Improvement

McREL's strengths are reflected in the views of its clients, many of whom are passionately appreciative of the Laboratory. It has provided expertise in areas central to school improvement.

The Laboratory uses many means to guide the development of their products and services; for example, needs-sensing meetings, feedback from clients, a formal quality-assurance process, and self-reflection meetings amongst staff.

Because of its leadership role, the Laboratory needs to be especially careful to ensure that its products and services are research based and eventually rigorously evaluated. Evaluation efforts need to be focused on student outcomes and changes in teacher behavior.

Other Comments

An area of difficulty for the interim evaluation of the Laboratory was the co-mingling of information such that it was sometimes not clear to the Panel whether the information applied to the OERI portion of the Laboratory's funding or whether it applied to the Laboratory as a whole, or to McREL, which includes the Laboratory as well as other monies received mainly from State Education Agencies. The differences can be substantial; for example, for the three fiscal years 96–98, the OERI monies accounted for 43% of the total funding, while what is termed "Laboratory" on a document provided to the Panel on 5/3/99 accounted for 71% of the total funding. Granted, the Laboratory may not have needed to do such explicit parsing as part of their work; however, given the clearly delineated task of the Panel, it would have been clearly of benefit to the Panel if a clearer demarcation between the OERI portion and Laboratory as whole had been made.

Despite the aforementioned concerns, it was clear that the Laboratory fully cooperated in the evaluation. Without such excellent cooperation, the evaluation would have been almost impossible to carry out within the agreed-upon parameters.

Finally, the Laboratory aptly noted that all the laboratories “have struggled to align the agendas of the Department of Education on the national level, the various agendas of states in each region and the needs of people not traditionally well served by existing educational systems.” McREL has struggled and succeeded in aligning the aforementioned agendas.